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ABSTRACT

This paper examines quality in providing early childhood education and development (ECED) services and presents an exercise to guide critical reflection on quality in ECED provision. It maintains that there has been a shift away from the study of children as solitary learners to the study of children learning in a social context. This research evidence has strengthened the advocacy for ECED provision to be more child-centered and less teacher-directed, more concerned with the child's context and culture, and more sensitive of the child's need for continuity. Early childhood education has been influenced by these challenges to curriculum and instructional methods. Both the focus on the child-centered approach and the increasing demands for quality have encouraged critical reflection on the quality of ECED service provision. A 5-step exercise can assist in defining quality: (1) apply a "bottom up perspective on quality" by considering the child's experiences from a child's point of view to reveal a value and belief base emphasizing children's self-esteem and competence development and active learning; (2) examine one's own values and beliefs to identify the assumptions related to a definition of quality; (3) determine parents' perceptions of their relationship with the teacher and their concerns regarding the program; (4) identify teacher/caregiver concerns; and (5) use the workshop process in the Coordinators' Notebook to bring stakeholders together to define quality indicators based on the responses to the previous questions. (Contains five references.) (KB)

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Defining high quality ECED provision.

A note and an exercise.

ECED takes place in varied settings which can include families or/and private, state or voluntary services. Although research has identified a number of characteristics which determine quality, the evidence also suggests that much of the variation between settings may be accounted for by their differing aims, communities and priorities. Also, by what is believed and valued by those making ECED provision.

For example, one of the main areas of research into ECED has been into how children acquire a sense of self and how they learn effectively. As a result of research evidence, there has been a major shift away from the study of the child-as- solitary-learner (based on Piaget's work) to the child-as-learner-in-social-context (based on the work of Vygotsky)[1]. This research evidence has strengthened the advocacy for ECED provision to be more child centred and less teacher directed, to be more concerned with the child's context, culture and community (and the meanings that he or she attributes to these) and to be more sensitive to the child's need for continuity from family into formal schooling[2]. Almost all ECE provision has been affected by the challenge this focus presents for curriculum methods and organisation of provision, for the way resources are used and for choices we make in the physical settings we work in, for the ways in which teachers work with parents and for how teachers prioritise listening and communication in their direct contact with children.

The challenge of the child centred approach has made us stop and think about what we are doing, if we are doing it well, and if not, why are we continuing to do it at all. The urgency to review and to evaluate has come from another realisation: ECED providers across the world are facing the issue of lack of quality in both ECE and ECED provision, especially in those models which have started small with great aspirations and lost something vital in the process of going to scale.

> "Ironically, although the motives for seeking scale are often humanitarian, a sense of humanity can easily get lost in the process of getting bigger. An emphasis on achieving the broadest coverage possible can, and often does, lead to undue emphasis on numbers which become goals in and of themselves, taking the emphasis off a more fundamental concern with the human condition " (Robert Myers , 1992, p.370)[3]

Is this a familiar picture? How can we be sure that our own provision may not appear this way to someone else - a parent, or a child for example? This note sets out an "exercise" in five steps to reflect critically on quality in ECED provision. In doing so, the process is intended to assist you to make your own definitions of quality. It makes use of the ideas which come from the work of Lilian Katz at ERIC in the USA,[4] and by others in the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development writing in the Coordinators'

[1] VYGOTSKY, L. (1978) Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

[2] SIRAJ-BLATCHFORD, I. (1996) Research and evaluation: its impact on public policies for early childhood education. Paper presented at the IV Latin American Symposium on Research and Evaluation on Integrated Development Programmes for Children 0-6 years old, Brasilia.

[3] MYERS, R.G. (1992) The Twelve Who Survive. Strengthening programmes of Early Childhood Development in the third world. Routledge, London

[4] KATZ, L (1993) Multiple Perspectives on the Quality of EC Programmes, ERIC Digest, EDO/PS/93/2

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Notebook[5] These ideas help us get beneath the surface of general views of effectiveness characteristics to reveal the processes by which children sustain, modify, shape, change and create their environment, and by which parents and staff gain confidence about how to achieve high quality.

FIRST, try applying what Lilian Katz calls the **"bottom up perspective on quality"** to an example of ECED provision that you know, and answer the following questions from **a child's point of view**:

Do I usually feel welcomed rather than captured?

Do I feel like I belong or am I just one of a crowd? Does the teacher know my name?

Do I usually feel accepted, understood and protected rather than scolded or neglected by adults?

Am I usually accepted rather than isolated or rejected by the majority of my peers?

Am I usually addressed seriously and respectfully, rather than as someone who is 'cute'?

Do I find the activities engaging, absorbing and challenging?

Do I find most of the experiences meaningful, rather than boring?

Am I usually glad to be here, rather than eager to leave?

As you will see, these questions reveal **a value and belief base** which puts the emphasis on children's development of self esteem and competence, and on children being active learners in an environment designed to support their overall development. This base is not arbitrary, anymore than quality is itself. It is a choice or direction that has been made, indirectly perhaps, in the ECED provision.

SECONDLY, as we do not tend to make our values and beliefs explicit very often, sometimes it is difficult to be sure what assumptions each of us brings to a definition of quality. What do you think **your responses** would be to the following questions and statements:

What is it that I want children to be when they grow up?

What values do I want them to have?

What do I want them to be able to do?

I believe that in order to achieve these things children need.....

I believe that young children learn best when.....

I believe that the role of adults in the process is.....

Therefore, for me a quality programme .....

Undertaking such an exercise will help you get a sense of the values 'lens' that you use when viewing an early childhood programme.

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[5] CONSULTATIVE GROUP ON EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT (1996) Coordinators' Notebook no.18 on Quality, c/o Dr. Judith Evans, 6 The Lope, Haydenville, MA0-1039 USA. Tel (413) 268-7272 Fax (413) 268-7279 e-mail info@ecdgroup.com

THIRDLY, do you think a parent of a child in the ECED provision you are thinking of would agree with your responses? Research has shown that in essence **parents are concerned with four things**:

Is the place safe and pleasant?

Does it 'fit' with family needs? (eg times of service, place, affordability, reliability)
What will the child experience in terms of cultural support? (will the child's culture be respected, are the values of the ECED provision consistent with the family's, will the staff work with the parent to integrate home and ECED provision?)

Will the programme prepare my child for school?

It would be useful to find out if these four things are reflected in the questions parents might ask in the setting you are thinking of. In Lilian Katz's model, she describes parents (and staff) as providing the **'outside-inside' perspective** on quality. She provides this list of questions which should be answered by **both parents and staff** to determine if the programme is of high quality:

Are my relationships with staff (or parents)

- primarily respectful, rather than patronising or controlling?
- accepting, open, inclusive and tolerant, rather than rejecting, blaming or prejudiced?
- marked by contacts that are ongoing and frequent, rather than rare and distant?

Are my preferences for the goals and values for the children treated with respect?

There is sometimes a discrepancy between what parents say they want for their child and how they act in relation to the child. Sometimes what they do is not likely to get them the outcome they desire. This is also true of teachers and caregivers.

FOURTHLY, in thinking about **the teacher or caregiver** in ECED settings, do you think that there are significant differences between their responses and those of parents?

Lilian Katz talks about the **'Insider" concerns** of staff as falling into three areas: colleague relationships, practitioner-parent relationships, and those relationships that exist with the manager or funder of the ECED provision. There is a strong connection between a high quality ECED provision and the level of satisfaction teachers and caregivers feel in their relationships with children, parents, other colleagues and management.

Teachers and caregivers often find themselves treating children the way they themselves are treated. Some questions caregivers and teachers might ask themselves include:

Are working conditions adequate to encourage me to enhance my knowledge, skills and career commitment?

Am I usually treated with respect and understanding?

The answers that a teacher or caregiver feels able to give, particularly in developing countries, will reveal just her or his importance in the quality equation.

FIFTHLY, you will have collected a series of pictures in this exercise of the views of persons and groups who are clearly stakeholders in the ECED process. Do you find that you could not define quality without including all these views? Do you think that by **including all the stakeholders** that you could together begin to define and agree on indicators for for quality in an ECED provision? In the Coordinators' Notebook, from which most of these ideas in this note are drawn, a workshop process is suggested to bring the stakeholders together for the purpose of **defining quality indicators** based on the responses to the questions raised above. This could guide you in taking the next steps.....

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